

October 10, 2004

The Capitalist Yogi

Flags flew half-staff in New Mexico on Friday in honor of Yogi Bhanjan, a Sikh spiritual leader who died in his sleep at his home in Espanola on Wednesday at age 75. New Mexico governor Bill Richardson, a former congressman and Energy Secretary, ordered the tribute in a gesture aimed as much at Yogi Bhanjan's economic contribution to the state as his spiritual success. At a time when many Americans are gnashing their teeth at news of Indians taking away their jobs, Yogi Bhanjan's remarkable success in reconciling religion and commerce while creating employment is worth relating.

Born Harbhajan Singh Puri in what is now Pakistan, Yogi came west during his mid-life after a fairly privileged childhood. His father was a doctor and Singh studied in private schools in the hills. A lifelong yoga practitioner, he came to Canada in 1968 after a working government job in revenue and customs. He drifted down to Los Angeles at the height of the flower power, and eventually settled down in New Mexico, where he founded the Sikh Dharma, a slight variant of the Sikh religion. He professed to teach Kundalini Yoga, and his followers – converts to Sikh Dharma – were almost all white. As can be expected, he had his share of spooked critics – "Bogi Yogi," some folks called him – and there were the usual charges of cronyism, moral turpitude etc.

But it was his business enterprise, as much as his religious teaching, that was striking. And we are not talking of the mandatory workshops, books, tapes etc that is the contribution of many guru types. An economics graduate from the Punjab University, Yogi Bhanjan (he changed his name when he settled down in New Mexico) encouraged his followers to start their own businesses. He saw no conflict between spirituality and prosperity. One of his first enterprises was Yogi Tea, now a leading brand in the health products section. That was just a dip in the kettle compared to what followed.

The Sikh Dharma's main business arm today is Akal Security, a firm that specializes in protecting government sites, military installations, missile

ranges, civil amenities and even airports across the United States. It is an enterprise of staggering proportions. With more than \$ 1 billion in federal contracts and a 12,000 member work force, it was listed among the fastest growing companies in the country two successive years. It guards some 400 buildings across the country, including the Baltimore-Washington International Airport and the Ronald Reagan Building next to the White House in Washington.

Recently, Akal Security beat 20 other companies to bag a \$250 million contract to protect five Army bases and three weapons depots, according to a glowing New York Times just last week. The Pentagon had turned to the private sector to replace soldiers sent to Iraq. Akal's biggest security contract to provide protection for federal courthouses and judges is worth a whopping \$ 854 million. And its food products division that makes herbal teas, natural cereals, dietary supplements and health and beauty products has crossed \$ 60 million in annual revenues.

Probably because the dividing line between religion and politics is fairly thin in Sikhism, Yogi Bajan and his followers made no secret of their political activism, even though they were looked at with suspicion by the orthodoxy. They give tens of thousands of dollars to both Democrats and Republicans. When the yogi celebrated his 75th birthday recently, four state governors turned up for the celebrations. The U.S has seen many spiritual gurus from India, but Yogi Bajan was one of a kind.
